

Somerset Mother-Daughter Team Named SBA's 2008 New Jersey Small Business Persons of the Year

In 1996, Kathy Kady-Hopkins and her mom, Chris Sherwood took a leap of faith and started ASL Interpreter Referral Service, Inc. from their New Brunswick homes with a \$2,000 investment. Twelve years later, they find themselves as the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) 2008 New Jersey Small Business Persons of the Year.

Kathy is the president and Chris is the vice president of ASL Interpreter Referral Service, Inc., a Somerset-based firm that specializes in providing interpreters (signers) on a 24/7 basis for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or for those who are also deaf and blind.

In making the announcement, SBA New Jersey District Director James A. Kocsi said that Kady-Hopkins and Sherwood were selected for the award based on criteria that include: Staying Power (a substantial history of an established business); Growth in Number of Employees; Increase in Sales; Financial Strength of the Company; Innovativeness of Product or Service Offered; Response to Adversity and Contributions to Aid Community Oriented Projects. The mother daughter team was nominated for the award by Rosemary Dente, vice president/SBA business development officer for Susquehanna Bank.

"Kathy and Chris are your typical entrepreneurs; they are risk takers, people with vision and passion and an understanding of what it takes to nurture an idea and build it into a successful company," said Kocsi. "All across New Jersey there are companies just like ASL Interpreter Referral Service, Inc. that are making enormous contributions to the local economy. It is small business owners like Kathy Kady-Hopkins and Chris Sherwood who are meeting payrolls and providing innovative services that shape the landscape of our economy."

Kathy, who has been hard of hearing since birth, worked for AT&T prior to



All in the Family---Chris Sherwood (seated left) and her daughter Kathy Kady-Hopkins (seated right) were named the U.S. Small Business Administration's 2008 New Jersey Small Business Persons of the Year. The co-owners of ASL Interpreter Referral Service, Inc. of Somerset are seen here with their SBA Award. Standing behind Chris is her daughter Lynda Yetnifoff (Kathy's sister) and standing behind Kathy is her other sister Kim Asack. Both sisters work at ASL.

starting the company. She sold telecommunications products to people with disabilities, and was involved in implementing the company's telecommunications relay service for the deaf. She also became well versed in the Americans with Disabilities Act law and managed AT&T's in-house interpreting service nationwide.

So when AT&T was downsizing and offering compensation packages to its employees, Kathy accepted the buyout. "I always dreamed of owning my own business," said Kathy. "I have two aunts and an uncle and cousins who are deaf. My husband Paul is deaf. I knew there was a need for this service and how frustrating it was for people to get an interpreter. I decided we were going to change the market for these services."

So Kathy approached her mom about going into business together. At the time, Chris owned Aura Associates, a training company that specialized in management skills. "When Kathy approached me about starting the business it was difficult for me to break away from my business, but I knew it was the right thing to do," said Chris. "We just did it and the business took off quickly."

"The key to this business is that we are providing a 24/7 service to our clients," said Chris. "A call can come from anyone at anytime and we are ready to help that client. It could be from a hospital emergency room with a real life and death situation, and we are there to send someone

there on the spot."

Both women credit the SBA for helping them with the growth of their business. They used a \$157,200 SBA-backed loan from Temecula Valley Bank to purchase an office condo in 2005. The new 1200 square foot office space allows for a training facility, where clients can receive training in basic sign language, sensitivity training and TTY relay training.

One of the very first jobs ASL Interpreter Referral Service, Inc. did was to provide an interpreter at a Somerville campaign stop for Bob Dole during his run for president in 1996.

Today, ASL Interpreter Referral Service, Inc. has grown to nine employees, works with over 200 independent contractors and handles approximately 4,500 requests, annually, for interpreter services for their clients throughout New Jersey and parts of New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware.

As part of SBA's National Small Business Week festivities (April 21st – April 25th), Kady-Hopkins and Sherwood were honored in Washington, D.C. by SBA Administrator Steve Preston, where they competed for the title of SBA National Small Business Person of the Year with representatives of 49 other states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam. President Bush honored all 53 winners at a White House ceremony and reception that he hosted.

Kady-Hopkins and Sherwood were also honored by the SBA New Jersey District Office and the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce at the Annual New Jersey Small Business Week Awards Luncheon on May 2nd at the Pines Manor in Edison.